

# CAN WE TRUST THE BIBLE?

The Bible is crucial to the Christian faith. It claims to be an exclusively authoritative message from God to mankind, describing itself as being “God-breathed”. The Bible’s teaching and its accounts of the life of Jesus (the gospels) define Christian belief. This begs very important questions: Are the gospels accurate in their portrayal of Jesus? Is the Bible reliable? Are there good reasons for suspecting that the Bible may indeed be God’s own book on life, the universe and everything?

## CAN WE TRUST THE NEW TESTAMENT AND THE GOSPELS?

There are three acid tests that can be applied to ancient texts to establish their reliability: How long after the events was it written (which asks whether the authors were in a position to know what happened)? What is the interval to the oldest surviving manuscript and how many early copies do we have? (which helps us to verify that what we now have is what was originally written)

It’s widely accepted that the New Testament was completed by the end of the first century. Some of the gospels were written within 30 years of the events they report. Two of the gospels, Matthew and John, were written by Jesus’ closest friends. Mark and Luke, who wrote the other two, were close associates of the apostles Peter and Paul. The authors were in the best position to know first-hand or from first-hand witnesses the events they reported. The gospels would have been in circulation when many other first-hand witnesses would still have been alive, meaning exaggerations or inaccuracies could have been exposed.

The oldest surviving complete copy of the New Testament dates from AD. 350, with partial examples from as early as AD 130, 30 years after it was completed, and fragments of some gospels from the second half of the first century. In comparison the next most reliable ancient document is Homer’s Iliad with copies dating from 500 years after its origin. The earliest copies of the works of Aristotle are from 1,440 years after the original, but no historian would doubt these works to be authentic.

The number of surviving early copies is significant because it allows you to see if the modern text has been significantly changed. If a manuscript was changed, that variation would be multiplied through later copies. If there are significant differences when you compare the early copies then this is an indication that the text has been changed from what was originally written. There are over 500 copies of the New Testament from earlier than AD 500 giving much scope for comparison. Although these copies sometimes have slight differences in wording or spelling, if all of the passages which are in reasonable doubt as to their accuracy were lumped together, they would form a half-page of text. When we compare the New Testament with other early writings we find it to be in a league of its own for reliability. On a historical basis, the New Testament is by far the most easily verified piece of ancient literature.



DOCUMENT	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPY	TIME LAPSE	NO. OF COPIES
Herodotus	488 - 428 BC	AD 900	1,300 years	8
Thucydides	460 - 100 BC	AD 900	1,300 years	8
Tacticus	AD 100	AD 1100	1,000 years	20
Caesars Gallic Wars	58 - 50 BC	AD 900	950 years	9 - 10
Livy's Roman History	59 BC - 17 AD	AD 900	900 years	20
The New Testament	AD 40 - 100	AD 130	30 - 310 years	5,000 Greek, 10,000 Latin, 9,300 others

## RELIABILITY OF WITNESSES

We can show that the gospels were written by sources who knew what happened and that what we have now accurately reflects what they wrote. A valid question to ask is whether the authors themselves are reliable in their reporting of the events. Of the original eleven disciples who were with Jesus over the whole period of his public life, all faced the severest persecution for what they proclaimed. Ten were killed for their faith and the other was tortured and exiled. It seems crazy that they should give their life for something they knew to be false for little earthly reward.

## DOES THE BIBLE ACCORD WITH ARCHAEOLOGICAL INVESTIGATION?

The historical accuracy of the Bible has repeatedly been verified by archaeology. Examples from the gospels include the discovery of the pool of Bethesda and evidence for Pontius Pilate, formerly known only from the Bible. From the Old Testament there's clear archaeological evidence for the slavery and exodus of the Jews from Egypt, the conquest of the promised land, the exile to Babylon, the fall of the Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian empires and the rise of King Cyrus.

## THE WORDS OF GOD?

We can claim that the Bible is reliable in its historical detail and that what we have today is what was originally written. We can show that its authors were willing to stake their life on what they taught, but it's still a huge claim to say that the Bible is God speaking. There are a number of things that can be considered as evidence of God's involvement with the Bible. We can ask whether the prophecies in the Bible, both of historical events (eg. the rise and fall of several different empires) and of Jesus, are actually fulfilled? Jesus fulfils over 200 prophecies about himself including the date and place of his birth, details of his ministry and life and his death and subsequent resurrection.

The Bible was written over 1500 years by over 60 different human authors. We can investigate whether there is coherence in the message it proclaims. We can ask the basic question 'does this ring true?' Finally we can investigate the credibility of the Bible's foremost teacher, Jesus of Nazareth. In checking out the Bible it should be noted that there is no substitute for reading it! A great place to start is with one of the gospels, Matthew, Mark, Luke or John. This will put us in the best place to make a judgement as to whether this is really God's 'letter to humanity'.

